The Quality of Laughter in Godly Play

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The laughter of Godly Play flows out of God's playful presence. It is the sound of hopeful, confident, creative delight, like the second time Sarah laughed. There is always a struggle between this laughter and its opposite --- the sound of despair, anxiety, and emptiness. These sounds, tending in opposite directions, are often heard in mixed forms, so our task here is to clearly distinguish them, so we can make the laughter that expressed Sarah's creativity in the birth of Isaac the sound of our lives and the foundation for teaching of the art of speaking and living Christian language fluently.

This means that Godly Play is a political act. We need to choose our laughter well to be life-giving rather than death-dealing. We need to choose, listen, and do what needs to be done to help create and recreate the community of creating in the church, where such laughter can flourish. We need to choose Sarah's second laughter, be guided by its sound, and teach it as foundational to the language of our Christian community.

Original Laughter and Its Corruption

When Abram was very old God appeared to him, perhaps in the desert under a sky filled with stars. God said I am "El Shaddai." You and I will cut a covenant. Abram agreed to walk before God and be blameless. What else could he do? He was overwhelmed by God's presence.

God went on. You will no longer be called "Abram" but "Abraham" and "Sarai" will be "Sarah" --- putting the sound of laughter, the "Ha," in each name. This is because you will be the mother and father of a great family. Abraham immediately saw the problem. A great *family*? He and Sarah were very old and had no children together of

their own. How could a great family flow from the creative joining their old bodies? Abraham laughed so hard at this thought that he "fell on his face (Genesis 17: 17)," overcome with the incongruity of someone his age fathering forth and Sarah, who was only slightly younger, to conceive, bear, and suckle a child.

Later three strangers appeared at Abraham's tent near the oaks of Mamre. Abraham and Sarah greeted them. While Sarah was busy with the preparations for a feast to welcome the strangers she heard them tell Abraham that she would bear a son. Sarah laughed to herself (Genesis 18: 12). The Holy One asked, "Did you laugh." Sarah was afraid and said, "No." But The Lord said, "Is there anything too wonderful for the Creator." God then reminded her, "You *did* laugh."

Sarah's first laugh was a mixture of incongruity shot through with irony and doubt. This is why she was afraid. She had doubted God, but this doubt disappeared when the baby was born. Abraham named him "Isaac," which in Hebrew means, "He laughs." Sarah had given birth to "Laughter" and responded with the laughter of delight. She said "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me (Genesis 21: 6)." Her laughter did not last. Her creativity failed when she dealt with Hagar the Egyptian and her son with Abraham, who was called Ishmael. She said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman and her son." They were sent away into the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

The first laughter of delight we hear in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of Sarah, but it is already delight mixed with incongruity and irony. Her laughter then falls silent as Sarah and Abraham deal with Hagar and her young child. This means that the first laughter we hear in Christian scripture is also located in the story of Abraham and Sarah,

but Sarah's laughter of delight has not always been given its due. In 2013 Catherine Conybear changed that. She published *The Laughter of Sarah*.

Conybear described the laughter of Sarah at Isaac's impossible birth to be a release "from self-consciousness, and from the need for words." Sarah's laugh was also "a great, irrational, infectious welling-up of joy." Such laughter might arise again at any time "from the most trivial of causes, as well as from the weightiest. It may arise in ordinary or dreary or even hostile situations. The laughter of delight surpasses and baffles language." It dissolves and confounds our presuppositions and expectations.[1] Conybear must have laughed out loud, as she tried to capture in her book what she knew was by nature "uncapturable." Laughter is a wholly different kind of communication made up of breath and sound. It expresses fundamental meaning but without words.

Despite the delight expressed by Sarah's second laughter, much of the laughter heard in the Old Testament implies scorn. The Psalmist assumed that God laughs in derision at God's enemies. "He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord has them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury (Psalm 2: 4-5)." He also wrote, "But you laugh at them, O Lord, you hold all the nations in derision (Psalm 59: 8)." God will also "break down" the evildoers so that the righteous will fear God and laugh at the evildoers (Psalm 52: 8). Not all delight is extinguished. Psalm 100 begins with the euphoric "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing (Psalm 100: 1-2).

The book of Proverbs tells how Wisdom, "cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice," but if you do not follow her ways she will "laugh at your calamity"

[1] Catherine Conybeare, *The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) x.

and mock you when "panic strikes you like a storm (Proverbs 1: 26)". There is a dark threat in such laughter. Proverbs also speaks of the heart being sad even in laughter because the end of joy is grief (Proverbs 14:13)."

In Ecclesiastes "The Teacher" dwelt on our insanely self-confident vanity. Enjoying oneself is vanity and to laugh madness (Ecclesiastes 2:2). This is why sorrow is better than laughter (7:3). This theme dead ends in the startling irony of "Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of the countenance the heart is made glad." The "gladness" of a sad face is because the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth (Ecclesiastes 7: 3-4)." The effort at balance in the aphorism "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3: 4)" is hard to hear against the strong beat of sorrow against laughter.

In Psalm 126: there is a song about the Lord restoring the fortunes of Zion. This left people as in a dream. Their mouths were filled with laughter and their tongues made shouts of joy. "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy (Psalm 126: 5)." On the other hand, the only counsel for laughter in Job comes from the false counsel of Bildad. He argues that Job really must have done something wrong, because God would not reject a blameless person. God fills the mouth of the innocent with laughter and they shout with joy (Job 8: 20-21)! Bildad thinks that laughter is a reward, but Job says, "No." He was blameless. There is no guarantee for either innocence or laughter.

When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind there is a hint of sarcastic laughter. Why does Job presume to contend with God? You cannot catch God like a Leviathan with a tiny fishhook or control God like you might play with a little bird (Job 41: 1-5).

Such threatening laughter seems to be the majority view in the Old Testament, despite the second time Sarah laughed at the beginning of scripture in Genesis.

The New Testament is as suspicious about laughter as the Old Testament. One must approach the New Testament with great sensitivity to find any positive hints of laughter. Did the laughter of delight accompany the joy of healing? Did Jesus laugh when he told parables? There are more questions than answers. When laughter is mentioned explicitly it is usually in a negative way.

The beatitudes are important guides for Christian living found in Matthew and Luke (Matthew 5: 3-4, 6; Luke 6: 20–26). Matthew, however, said nothing about laughter as a component for being "the salt of the earth" or "the light of the world." Luke's collection of blessings and woes did mention laughter, but in a negative way. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh (Luke 6: 21)." He also records Jesus pronouncing woe on those "who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:25)."

When Luke's blessings and woes are added to the powerful and central image of Jesus suffering on the cross there seems little cause for laughter in the New Testament. In addition Jesus was never recorded as laughing or smiling. The authority for weeping is all the gospels leave behind. Jesus was recorded as weeping twice. One time was at the death of Lazarus (John 11: 35). The other time was as he approached Jerusalem for the last time (Luke 19: 41). There is also the inference that by weeping we can join with Christ while laughter distances us from him. Peter wept after he betrayed Christ (Matthew 26: 75; Mark 14: 72; Luke 22: 62), which brought him closer to his Master and began his transformation from sand into the rock upon which the church could be built.

Nevertheless, in 1969 Conrad Hyers called Elton Trueblood a pioneer in teasing out Jesus' "sly" sense of humor.[2] Elton Trueblood (1900-1994) was a Quaker philosopher and theologian, who held faculty and chaplain positions at Harvard, Stanford, and Earlham College. He became interested in Jesus' laughter when "our eldest son was four years old."[3] They were reading about someone being concerned about a speck in another's eye when one had a whole log in his own (Matthew 7: 3). He knew you couldn't get a log in your eye. It was "ludicrous." Trueblood argued that we don't notice Jesus' humor, because the texts have been too long in the hands of humorless people, including himself before his son woke him up.

An example is the absurd idea of putting a candle under a woven basket or under one's straw bed. This would burn down the house rather than illuminate it! Today we piously interpret this saying to mean that we should let our strengths shine with confidence, but is that really what Jesus meant? To know the answer to this question we need to see if Jesus is smiling to get the full meaning. Trueblood's *The Humor of Christ* (1975) includes an appendix that lists thirty gospel passages that warrant further study to probe for their laughter.

The letters of St. Paul also have a humorless dark cloud over them. Why doesn't one smile when living in the Spirit occurs? Doesn't becoming a *new creation* warrant the laughter that expresses creativity (II Corinthians 5.17)? Could there be at least a twinkle in the eye when one does not rejoice at the wrong but *rejoices* in the right (1 Corinthians

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[2] M. Conrad Hyers, *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969) 169.

[3] Elton Trueblood, *The Humor of Christ: A Significant But often Unrecognized Aspect of Christ's Teaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 9.

13: 6)? These passages, however, only *suggest* positive laughter. Could there be moments of actual joking? There is, perhaps, at least one such moment.

Paul went on preaching until midnight. Eutychus dozed off and fell from a third story window. They thought he was dead. Paul bent over him and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him (Acts 19:7-10)." With the danger passed, did people have a good laugh about Paul's long-winded preaching? Was this a moment of slapstick?

Still, we must ask, again, "Did *Jesus* laugh." The question won't go away even if the historian can find no evidence of laughter in the gospels. When we range further afield with our question we find that the only explicitly laughing Christ known in the early Christian centuries was the heretical, Gnostic one. *The Apocalypse of Peter* tells how the week before Easter, Peter sees a vision in which Jesus is watching the crucifixion and laughing. This was because it was only his physical likeness that was being nailed to the wood of the cross. This laughter, the laughter of scorn, was to put down his foolish executioners. They did not know that the true Christ had already departed from his earthly body.

About 180 Irenaeus argued the orthodox position against the Gnostics' view of the overly spiritualized Jesus. Irenaeus countered that Jesus must be fully human as well as divine for redemption to be complete. Still, one wonders why being fully human does not include laughter. The laughing Gnostic Jesus, however, based on faulty theology, added to laughter's bad name in the early church.

We might also ask if Jesus and his disciples were *laughed at*? Was Jesus crucified as a fool? The answer to this question depends on what one means by being "foolish." It is true that he could have escaped at any moment up to the end. Why, then,

did he go to his death? The problem with this question is that what might be foolish for your or me, was not foolish for Jesus. Paul picked up this theme.

Jesus taught that whoever says, "'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:22)," but Paul wrote, "We are fools for the sake of Christ (I Corinthians 4:10)." The question about Jesus and his followers being fools involved a reversal of expectations about the Messiah as a politically powerful figure. Hanging Jesus on a tree also turned the Messiah into a criminal. Jesus was scorned and laughed at during Holy Week. Still, Paul inferred that being a "fool in Christ" corresponds to "the fool Christ himself."[4] Paul wrote, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (I Corinthians 1:17)." This kind of foolishness overcomes "the wisdom of the wise."

When we shift from scripture to theology we find a continuing sense of biblical nervousness about laughter, but now it is combined with the negative view of laughter held by the Greek philosophers. Neither the scornful laughter of the gods and the triumphant laughter of warriors, ringing out across the carnage on the planes of Troy, was very edifying. This made the Homeric scholars at the great library in Alexandria uneasy, so they developed allegories during the Hellenistic period to make the raw scorn of Homer's laughter a bit more reasonable and morally respectable.

Plato, however, had followed the tradition of scornful laughter, but tempered it by saying that persons of worth should never allow themselves to be overcome by laughter. In *The Republic* (388e) he wrote that the Guardians of the State should not laugh because violent laughter provokes a violent reaction. In the *Laws* (u: 816e; 11:935e) he forbade the writing of comedy.

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[4] Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 89.

Aristotle probed a bit deeper and argued that laughter was natural, a basic part of being human. It refreshed and relaxed people as well as acting as a weapon to be used to put down opponents in triumph. In his *Rhetoric* (2, 12) he warned that laughter was really insolence. When he discussed tickling he noticed that we do not laugh when we tickle ourselves.[5] He also did not consider human beings to have souls until they laugh, which takes place, he thought, on the 40th day after birth. His interest in laughter, however, may have been much more developed than what has survived for posterity. Some consider that the "lost" *Poetics II* was thought to include a discussion of laughter and comedy. We shall return to this in a moment.

The early church absorbed the negative view of laughter from scripture and the Greek philosophers. For example the Latin-speaking Ambrose (c. 340 – 397), Archbishop of Milan and mentor of Augustine, ordered the priests in his diocese not to laugh and to remember how Jesus blessed tears and pronounced woe on laughter. Ambrose wanted his clergy to avoid humor unless their words were "full of sweetness and grace, not indelicate,"[6] but he did not support the laughter of scorn at any time. It was uncharitable.

A contemporary of Ambrose, the Greek-speaking John Chrysostom (347-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, wrote:

> This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh; and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins. But some of you still want to say: "I would prefer God to give me the chance to go on

[5] "That a human being alone is affected by tickling is due first to the delicacy of the skin, and second to its being the only animal that laughs." *De Partibus Animalium* 3.10, 673a8.

[6] Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play: or, Did You Ever Practice Eutrapelia*? (London: Burnes and Oates, 1965) 97.

> laughing and joking." Is there anything more childish than thinking in this way? It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil.[7]

The blend of patristic authority, Greek philosophy and negative scriptural themes combined to assert that laughter is harmful to one's character, because it exposes one to something base. When we laugh we lose control of our rational faculties, which robs us of what most makes us human. We also lose control of our bodies, so it is indecorous and unseemly. Even if, like Ambrose, we feel the laughter of scorn is uncharitable, it is still easy to see why the negative view of laughter continued into the Middle Ages.

Still, laughter could not be eradicated. In the Middle Ages a sense of carnival developed among Catholics to give some breathing room and in the sixteenth century the Lutheran church developed a tradition of *risus paschalis*, Easter laughter, which has since become embodied in the German preaching tradition.[8] Karl-Josef Kuschel wrote somewhat guardedly that we might assume that being with God "need not always express itself in laughter, but … becomes concrete in laughter." When the barriers are broken down to include the marginal and excluded, he wrote, with "redeemed joy," there is an implied trust in God's laughing good will.[9]

In some Anglican churches there is still the custom of ringing of little bells in the congregation at Easter, but despite carnival, Easter laughter, and little bells, we can sometimes sense scorn for the heathen in the "triumph" of Easter as well as joy. Kuschel noted with sardonic realism that those who laughed at Jesus before Easter could be laughed at with revenge after Easter by Jesus' followers.

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[7] Rahner, *Man at Play*, 98.

[8] Kuschel, *Laughter,* 84-87.

[9] Kuschel, *Laughter*, 92-93.

As you can see, the mixture of negative and positive laughter has continued into modern times, but let us return to the fourteenth century to clarify what is at stake in the unstable mixture of laughter's scorn and delight. This brings us back to the hypothetical second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Walter Watson attempted to reconstruct *Poetics II* in his *The Lost Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics* (2012). It is his view that Aristotle said that the power of comedy comes from being a catharsis for laughter and pleasure, like tragedy is the catharsis for fear and pity. The portrayal of characters worse than us promotes pity in tragedy and laughter in comedy. Characters to be admired produce fear in tragedy and pleasure in comedy.[10]

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980 Italian, 1983 English) considered the suppression of laughter in a fourteenth century Benedictine Abbey in northern Italy. He placed the Venerable Jorge at the deadly serious end of a continuum of laughter. William of Baskerville, a Franciscan monk, was at the other end filled with curiosity, creativity, and a love for life.

In Eco's novel the blind, ancient Jorge de Burgos hid the Second Book of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the library of the abbey, because if found it would give tremendous authority to comedy and laughter. He feared this, because such authority would throw the seriousness of human sin into doubt. Laughter is of the Devil, because it minimizes sin and equivocates by its sound. This is why he felt justified putting poison on the book's pages. If a monk found it and licked his fingers while turning the pages he would die.

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[10] Walter Watson, *The Lost Second Book of Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012) 182.

Brother William's passion for truth was as strong as that of the Venerable Jorge, but his approach was deductive and analytical, not fearful and defensive. William was full of curiosity, which signaled his love of life and delight in the birth of what is new. Jorge protected the old, what he already knew as the truth. William lived in touch with the Image of God, the Creator, which produced the kind of laughter that Jorge feared. He thought that Aristotle had diverted our eyes from "the luminous cascade of the exemplary first cause" to fix them on the earth. Jorge refused to allow this erosion to be completed by "overturning the image of God," as he saw it. That monstrosity would have "crossed the last boundary."[11]

The "licitness of laughter" is a deep theme that runs through *The Name of the Rose*. It begins with a debate the first time Jorge appears in the novel in the scriptorium, an encounter in which he has the last word. "Do not waste your last days laughing at little monsters with spotted skins and twisted tails! Do not squander the last seven days."[12] By the chapter "Terce, early in the book, "the third conversation" ran on for five pages.[13] It also takes place in the scriptorium between Jorge and William, each quoting chains of authority concerning the quality of laughter's virtue.

William observes at one point that Jorge is controlling his lips but tacitly laughing --- at laughter! As the monks in the scriptorium gather to listen Jorge's power and control over them is at risk. He finally resorts to using a quote from a Franciscan to win a

[11] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, Warner books Edition, 1984), 576.

[12] Eco, *The Name of the Rose, 93*. The entire discourse is 86-93.

[13] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 148-153.

point by humor over William, the Franciscan. Quoting in Latin, he accused William of "breaking wind through the mouth."[14]

There is much more about laughter, as the book draws to its fiery close. In the dim light of a lamp Jorge sits across a table in the library. He smiles and then laughs three times out loud, but the laughter is terrifying rather than merry. Blind Jorge had been waiting all afternoon for Adso of Melk with his mentor Brother William to find the room in which he was sitting with the poisoned book of Aristotle's about comedy and laughter.

Adso later wrote, "He laughed, he Jorge. For the first time I heard him laugh … He laughed with his throat, though his lips did not assume the shape of gaiety, and he seemed almost to be weeping." This was the laughter of fear, destruction and death, a sound that destroys play and creativity. It crushes curiosity. Such laughter has no place in a Godly Play room, because it frustrates the invitation for God to come and play from beyond, beside, and within and for the image of God, the Creator, to flourish as it was created to do.

Finally, William said to Jorge, " The Devil is not the Prince of Matter; the Devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without a smile, truth that is never seized by doubt." Jorge replied, "You are worse than the Devil, Minorite. … You are a clown, like the saint who gave birth to you all."[15] Jorge then began to eat the poisoned book, tearing strips from it and stuffing them in his mouth. He dies, the library catches fire, and the whole monastery burns.

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[14] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 153.

[15] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 281.

William's natural curiosity about signs and the patterns they might form finally evolved into a pattern of "no pattern." He had just wept at the destruction of the greatest library in Christendom and now he looked at Adso, with a look that betrayed no feeling at all. His thought, however, was expressed, "It is hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the free will of God and His omnipotence. So the freedom of God is our condemnation, or at least the condemnation of our pride." It was, indeed his pride that was condemned, but his playfulness and curiosity was not. Brother William must have realized that he too was inflicted with pride like Jorge. That was no laughing matter.[16]

As William and Adso prepare to leave the collapsing beauty of the abbey, William says, "Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, to make truth laugh, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth."[17] They then picked up their traveling sacks and moved on, as we remember William saying earlier, "The hand of God creates; it does not conceal," as Jorge tried to do. At least William had that consolation.

There are times when it is unethical to laugh, when there is really nothing to laugh about. Karl-Josef Kuschel wrote as a German, Roman Catholic theologian at Tubingen. He was very sensitive to the outrage of the derisive and scornful laughter of those, who engineered the "final solution" of the "Jewish problem" in Nazi Germany and the Fascists, who attempt to manipulate entertainment. Adolf Hitler had said, "See to it that the German people learn to laugh again." What he meant was that the leisure time

[16] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 600.

[17] Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 598.

minister was to give the Third Reich "Power through joy." This was an obscene distortion of laughter. The deception was used to keep people in a good mood while they submitted to Hitler's whim. This too was no laughing matter.[18]

Kuschel cited the Letter of James to show how "moral unconcern" ought to be confronted. James advocated for drawing near to God to avoid the "double mind" of having no limits to laughter. People need to "Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you (James 4:8-10)." This is not the fanaticism and negativity of Jorge's closed, spiritual absolutism and pride, because it speaks of becoming humble. Unfortunately it moves in the direction of Jorge at the expense of William's openness to the creativity that the laughter of delight expresses. What we need to hold on to is the idea of *serious laughter* mentioned above and which we will expand on in a moment.

Kuschel moved from James' critique of laughter lacking a moral compass to his critique of Eco's novel. He considered Eco's view of laughter as "the absolutizing of laughter." He argued that Eco had adopted a postmodern attitude of an open-ended "playing" with all truths. This was suggested by William when he said, as translated by Kuschel, "Perhaps, in the end there is only one thing to do if one loves people, namely to make them laugh about the truth."[19]

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[18] Kuschel, *Laughter*, 122-125.

[19] Quoted in Kuschel, *Laughter*, 127. Kuschel's quotation is from *The Name of the Rose* (598), but the English translation of Martin Secker reads "Perhaps, the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, *to make truth laugh*, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth." This sentence is best interpreted with Jorge of Burgos as the example of an "insane passion for truth" although William realized that he too may have fallen victim to this devastating disease.

Decisions must be made and order kept. Kuschel stressed that Christian laughter comes from enjoying God's presence. This is what gives laughter meaning and value. This is closer to what Eco actually meant than Kuschel's interpretation of it as making laughter an end in itself. Eco's view was better indicated by the part of the quotation Kuschel left out, when Williams said, "*to make truth laugh*." Eco put this part of the sentence in italics, because he *did not* make laughter absolute, an end in itself. It is the means to truth in contrast to the grimly closed mind of Jorge. What is missed when laughter and seriousness are pitted against each other is the idea of serious laughter. We turn now to how joining laughter and seriousness can be accomplished through play.

Joining Seriousness and Laughter Through Play

The church has given more value to the frown and seriousness than the smile and laughter, but I would like to say that seriousness and laughter are not opposites. When seriousness and laughter are united instead of opposed the result is *serious laughter*, acknowledging that the laughter of delight expresses creativity and is not frivolous, superficial, nor silly. The creativity it expresses is related to the Image of God, as Creator. The sound of serious laughter is what we hear when children are at play in games they have chosen. The laughter of children suggests that seriousness and laughter can be joined through play.

A discussion took place for about decade, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which tried to join theological seriousness with play. The movement then disappeared, perhaps swallowed up in other theological concerns. This discussion, however, will serve to illustrate the issues involved in what I am calling "serious play."

On book stood out in this discussion. It was Jurgen Moltmann's 1971 essay *Die Ersten Freigelassenen der Schopfung*, which is 75 pages long in English translation, which made up the bulk of *The Theology of Play* (1972). The book also included comments on Moltmann's text by three proponents of play theology: Sam Keen, David L. Miller, and Robert E. Neale. Moltmann then offered three pages of response to their comments.

Moltmann was Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Tubingen from 1967-1994, when he retired. His interest in play was relevant to his emphasis on hope in theology. *The Theology of Play* was published between major works by Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (1967) and *The Crucified God* (1973). The book on play theology was not a major work by any of those involved, but it is a good encapsulation of the theology of play debate.

Easter is rejoicing in freedom but also in solidarity with those in bondage. It is play with "reconciled existence" and the pain of " unreconciled existence." If this is true, then, "games don't "always presume innocence."[20] This is the value of the game played with reconciliation and its opposite for people of all ages. The new creation does not just restore or repair the old creation. "It is a new game."[21] Grace aids people to create their way into an open future.

Moltmann's response cautioned Keen, Miller and Neale that "The Puritan of work easily changes into the Puritan of play and remains a Puritan." He challenged them to remember that when everything becomes play, then nothing is play, because play and

[20] Jurgen Moltman, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 31.

[21] Moltman, *Theology of Play*, 26.

non-play cannot be distinguished. Ecclesiastes loses its meaning. “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3: 4)” makes no sense. Pushing deeper he urged that in the meantime there are real tears of sadness. As he said, "Auschwitz remains Auschwitz."[22] Laughter is to liberate, Moltmann thought, so he was worried that play and laughter as discussed by Keen, Miller and Neale was used to tranquilize. Laughter should be a sign of awakening rather than sleeping.

Keen’s “godsong” asked if there could be a playful framing for the death of a kitten on a highway. The premise that there are no rules for games, however, leaves his “pointless point of fooling round and round” only an attempt “to turn the world topsy-turvy” without showing how to reframe evil by a game that can be played. The effort was worth making, but the poetry could not sustain the ideas. This was not Sam Keen at his best. He seems to think that play is disrupting games rather than playing them and the question of which game to play never gets addressed. He did seem to turn play theology into a closed ideology that depends on rationality and the structure of games to play its Dionysian “touch of madness” to disrupt them.[23] We shall return to Miller and Neale in a moment, but first we need to introduce another major player in this discussion, Hugo Rahner SJ. He was not included in this book, but he had been read by Moltmann, who mentioned his work.

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[22] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 111-113.

[23] We will have more to say about Neale and Miller, but to elaborate a bit more about Sam Keen we turn to Robert K. Johnston, who looked back on the general theology of play discussion about a decade later. He suggested that the early Keen did turn play into a closed ideology. He called Keen's view a "play therapy theology," which offered a diagnosis, vision, and prescription for our "dis-ease." Keen’s cure was to incorporate the Dionysian "touch of madness" with our customary cerebral, Apollonian order. Keen argued that play and laughter were involved in the sacred, because the sacred is everywhere to be found "in a cup of tea and the caress of the winds." (Robert K. Johnson, *The Christian at Play* (Wipf & Stock, 1997) 53-66. This book was originally published in 1983 as part of the controversy about play and theology.

Hugo Rahner SJ, the older brother of Karl Rahner SJ, stressed the importance of Aristotle's virtue of *eutrapelos*, which literally means "well-turning." This provides a description of the optimum way to play the existential game of life and death with theology in mind.

As was customary for his method, Aristotle located this virtue as a mean between two extremes. One extreme was a *bomolochos,* the kind of person who hung about the altar of sacrifice making jokes and hoping to snatch or beg a meal. The opposite extreme was the *agroikos*, the boor, whose coarse stiffness was despised. While the buffoon cannot resist a joke, the boor hates jokes, contributes nothing to humor, and takes offence at everything. Rahner thought that Aristotle's *eutrapelos* was reworked in Aquinas' theology, which gave rise to the "doctrine of the merry Christian." The merry Christian is someone who can see "the limits and inadequacy of all created things and for that very reason can smile, for the blessed seriousness of things divine is known."[24]

Moltmann thought that Rahner had slipped "into the gnostic-docetic way of thinking," and quoted an example. He was concerned about Rahner's view that "the mystic, whose vision penetrates all veils" was able to identify and live the "wondrously conceived game of an eternal love, a game so painstaking and manifold in its conception that only love could have devised it."[25] Moltman thought that Rahner's "*serious-merry* play" (Moltman's emphasis) "still remains outside the gates of the history of Christ."[26]

Moltmann's critique of Hugo Rahner seems a bit strained. Rahner was certainly no docetic and mystics do not necessarily over-spiritualize the humanity of Jesus.

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[24] Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (London: Herder & Herder, 1972) 100.

[25] Quoted in Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 1972, 28-29.

[26] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 1972, 33.

Rahner's theology of play combined the laughter and play of the body and the spirit to live the mean between the *bromolochos* and the *agroikos*. He understood the incarnation, which is why he talked about the merry Christian combining the body and the spirit as well as the depths of sorrow and the heights of happiness. This view, in fact, sounds like Moltmann's idea of the play of reconciled and unreconciled existence in Easter, but to discuss this further we must return once again to the cross.

Doesn't the sadness of Holy Week trump anything we might say about laughter? Moltmann wrote, "I think we should literally and sincerely leave the cross out of the game. In spite of Bach, the dying agonies of Jesus do not fit the categories of song. Though we must not understand his death as a tragedy in the classical sense, still Jesus did not die as a 'fool.' After all, Golgotha was not Oberammergau."[27]

The real game begins after the cross for Moltmann with the laughter of Easter, but who is and is not a fool depends on one's perspective and how much Holy Week is considered part of Easter. Blending the cross and the open tomb is what, it seems to me, brings forth the characteristic virtue of Easter. My view is that joy as the quintessential Christian virtue, because it juxtaposes ultimate sadness and ultimate happiness. You can't understand happiness without sadness, nor sadness without happiness and Easter joy's depth involves both. The laughter of Easter is *serious laughter*, which expresses the wonder of creativity and the loss of innocence. It is the second laughter of Sarah mixed with the irony of her first laughter and the tragedy of her driving Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. Still, all things are possible with the Creator --- birth, sin, and rebirth.

To examine this further, let's turn to the contributions of Miller and Neale to *Theology of Play*. David Miller looked back to his part in the discussion of play theology

[27] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 1972, 29.

from over forty years in the introduction to the 2013 edition of *Gods and Games* (1970). He updated the subsequent literature, but most importantly told a story about himself, as a young professor, meeting with the legendary Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002). Gadamer visited Syracuse University, where Miller taught, and they talked about Gadamer's classic *Truth and Method*, which connected play with the process of interpreting texts and life. One day Gadamer mentioned Miller's book, *Gods and Games*. "You almost got the point."

Gadamer thought that part of Miller's missing the point was because in German one *plays play* (*ein Spiel spielen*). In English there are two words used to say this, which implies that play has to do with, as Gadamer said, "fun and games." Gadamer thought this linguistic fact had gotten Miller too much involved in games. The point of play, Gadamer said, was that it gives us room to live, like having some play in a wheel, so it will turn. Godamer concluded that there has to be *Spielraum*," "Play room" is the point!

Miller concluded his 2013 introduction by saying, "So that was it. It is not a matter of games." Play is what we in English call "leeway." Some play in life is necessary "as in a bicycle wheel, a little space, some distance, in relationships, in ideas, in our psychology, in life … so that the wheel will turn."[28] That was what his book was about forty years ago and still is some forty years later. Of course, we must add, the reframing of an activity *as a game* for playing does give us this leeway, so both he and Gadamer, English and German, are right.

[28] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (Mill Valley, California: Stillpoint Digital Press, 2013). "Introduction to the eBook Edition (2013)." The Harper Colophon edition was published in 1973 in the midst of the theology of play debate.

Reframing an activity as play prevents it from being tightened all the way down, which puts both the game and the player in danger of breaking. The reframing says that we can relax and not take things so seriously. Reframing happens more often than we may realize, because one doesn't have to use the language of play to describe this event. An example of using non-play language to signal the reframing of life and death as a game can be found in Neale's section of *Theology of Play* that accomplishes this by talking about an "adventure."

Robert E. Neale published *In Praise of Play* in 1969. This was his early contribution to the discussion of the theology of play. He drew on some of what was written there to respond to Moltmann by asking us to realize that play is an adventure and that in adventures the risks are real, involving both laughter and tears. An adventurer knows that even life may be lost when the game is worth playing, such as in mountain climbing or Arctic travel. Play is not a particular mood, which is a state or quality of feeling. It is a condition, a reframing, which sets life and death in a frame that is limited and not ultimate. We know that the ultimate seriousness of the moment is taken care of by God and what is beyond us, so we can play at the game as presented to us and laugh with creativity while playing game, knowing that God will take care of the rest.

Within the frame of the adventure there are many moods, including the "negative" feelings of fear, anger, and grief. Christ suffered such emotions, yet his suffering was undergirded, not by anxiety, but by profound wonder and his very serious creativity to make what he was undergoing redemptive for others within the frame of his adventure, despite his suffering. Neale wrote, "Those who have participated in minor adventures

can recall such unworldly states. They will also be open to the possibility that God in Christ could participate in such a state as well."[29]

David L. Miller entered this debate decisively with his *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* in 1970. In *Theology of Play* he also took issue with Moltmann's humorless view of the cross. Jesus was neither completely serious nor laughing, but *seriously laughing* in my terms. Miller argued that any game is not about winning or losing, because these are not things we do, despite keeping score. They are modes of consciousness, which acknowledge that we cannot "win" in reality. Seeing life as a game also means that we can't really "lose" either. We have some leeway to be and to be creative.

Miller went on to say that the game of life is about realizing that winning and losing are a dialectic of loss-in-win and win-in-loss, which Jesus showed us by the unity of his life, death, and resurrection. It seems to me that laughing and crying at the same time might be the most appropriate response to Holy Week and Easter as well as to our own life and death and the lives of others.

Miller put the cross in terms of Jesus playing to lose, like good parents sometimes do. Strength sometimes merely looks like weakness to others, so the cross is still part of the game and, as I just suggested, Easter joy is the union of ultimate sadness and ultimate happiness. This means that when we wish someone a blessed Easter, we need to add --- at least as much as you can stand!

There is another figure in the field of theology, play, and laughter, who should be included in this conversation. Conrad Hyers was a Presbyterian minister, who earned a

[29] Robert E. Neale, *Theology of Play,* 84-85.

Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary and wrote some eight books about laughter and comedy in Christianity and Zen Buddhism between 1969 and 1996. He also refused to allow laughter and tears to become opposites and called for us to be aware that laughter always involves a "dialectic of the sacred and the comic."[30]

The sacred needs the comic to keep it open. The comic needs the sacred to keep it from becoming superficial and silly. As St. Paul observed, divine foolishness overturns human wisdom and divine weakness overcomes human strength (I Corinthians 1:27-28). This brings us back to the cross, yet once again.

From the perspective of the secular world the cross is merely foolish. From the perspective of Christianity it is part of the joy that comes from blending Holy Week and Easter. The cross is a strange but powerful truth in which the sacred and the comic are joined. Serious laughter arises from the juxtaposition of the crucifixion and the resurrection events. How could those who do not participate in the divinity of Christ understand his humanity and *vice versa*?

The church's historic resistance to laughter continues today, so the deep, rich laughter associated with Godly Play is not always well understood. In part this is because the laughter of children is often considered silly and superficial, so it is not really listened to. Religious education is designed to produce silly laughter, so Godly Play is countercultural in the church when it insists on serious laughter. When children's spirituality is shrunk to superficial fun and games it makes no sense to think that children's religious education might be something serious that takes training, dedication, talent, and intelligence. Godly Play pushes back against these mostly unconscious

[30] Conrad Hyers, *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969) 208-240.

prejudices to advocate for serious laughter that expresses the joy of Easter as the hallmark for Christian spiritual guidance of children.

The Venerable Jorge and William of Baskerville mark the opposing ends of the spectrum for laughter. What we need to do now is to fill in the kinds of laughter that can be heard in between these polar opposites. The philosophers have isolated four key types of laughter. If we are going to become sensitive to the kind of laughter in the Godly Play room, then, we need to examine this typology a bit more.

Six Key Types of Laughter

Laughter and humor have never composed a dominant theme in philosophy, but philosophers have identified four main kinds of laughter, two ancient and two modern, in between the dry sound of Jorge's fearful emptiness and William's rich laughter of curiosity and creativity. These four kinds of laughter arise from and express a sense of superiority, the experience of incongruity, relief after increasing tension, and a shift of framework, such as from work to play.[31] The total array, then, is this: Empty Laughter – Laughter of Superiority – Laughter of Incongruity – Laughter of Relief – Laughter from a Framework Shift – Laughter of Delight.

I have two cautions before commenting on this simplified typology. Orators have been very detailed in their analysis of the refreshment and persuasion laughter provides for their audiences. After Aristotle the most influential chapters on laughter were in Cicero's *On the Orator*, then about 150 years later in Quintilian's *Handbook on Oratory*, and then some 1,450 years later in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*, one of the most widely read books in the sixteenth century. Both Castiglione and Quintilian drew

[31] John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 38-59. The shift of framework from work to play was suggested by Morreall's idea about the "pleasant psychological shift.

extensively on Cicero, who, despite first impression of young Latin students, was a wit to the end. He is said to have quipped, as he leaned his head out of his litter to facilitate his execution, "There is nothing proper about what you are doing, soldier, but do try to kill me properly."

The second caution is that laughter can be complex, caused by a complicated mixture of causes. Mary Beard stressed this complexity against the three or four type summaries of laughter in her *Laughter in Ancient Rome* (2014) and provided a vivid example from Cassius Dio, the famous historian. He was sitting in the front row at the Colosseum in Rome as a young senator. The emperor Commodus (161-192) killed an ostrich in the arena and walked up to the senators holding up the long neck in one hand and his bloody sword in the other. He said nothing, but looked directly at them and smiled with malice.

Cassius began to chew the laurel leaves from his garland to keep from laughing.[32] He must have felt derision at this pitiful display, incongruity about how an emperor ought to act before the assembled senate, the increase of tension and its relief when he found a way not to laugh, and a shift of frame at this utterly impossible situation, which turned it into a play, a comedy instead of a tragedy. This was all in addition to the very dangerous political implications of laughter at that moment which would likely have resulted in death. A few months later in 192 CE, Commodus was assassinated.

With these two cautions in mind let us describe the four types of laughter between that of Jorge and William. The first is the laughter of derision. As we have said, the Greeks thought that laughter arose from a sense of victory and superiority but also as a

[32] Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) 2-3.

weapon to put people down. This view continued unchanged as the major opinion among philosophers until the seventeenth century when Thomas Hobbes observed in his *Leviathan* that laughter erupts when there is "a sudden glory," a passion that comes from overcoming another person or thing, including bettering ourselves. He added self-improvement to the superiority model.

Many philosophers, however, realized that there is self-depreciating as well as self-aggrandizing laughter. We sometimes laugh *with* clowns instead of at them, because we become aware that their foibles are exaggerations of those common to all of us. We also weep for people less fortunate than we are instead of laughing at them. This means that there must be more to a good laugh than derision.

The second kind of laughter comes from noticing incongruity in people and events. This model understands laughter as expressing the unexpected, the illogical, or the inappropriate. It assumes that each culture is a fairly orderly place, where exceptions to the customary make us laugh. In the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant asked somewhat obscurely what happens when an expectation "is suddenly transformed into nothing." He ventured into the world of jokes to give an example. A rich man was unable to plan a funeral because the more money he paid the mourners to look sad, the more cheerful they became. The laughter that comes from this, if any, is the result of the incongruity.

The incongruity model, of course, does not cover every case either. There are times when life's incongruity simply makes one sad. The incongruity of a child dying young produces tears instead of laughter. This problem pushed philosophers to seek to

identify a third type of laughter. It suggests that laughter comes from a sense of relief when tension is built up, then released.

The relief model of laughter began to be discussed in modern times in 1709 when Lord Shaftesbury published "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor." He argued that when nervous energy is dammed up, such as by a cultural taboo, and then released, laughter comes pouring out.

Sometimes, however, the release of pent up energy does not result in laughter. As Herbert Spencer put it a century later in an article in *Macmillan's Magazine*, "Sometimes anger carries off the arrested current and so prevents laughter."[33] The emotions began to play a more significant role in the theories of laughter.

In the twentieth century Freud elaborated on the discharge of energy idea in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* in 1905. He reasoned that when energy is drawn away from some psychic purpose, such as the repression of forbidden thoughts or feelings, where it is no longer needed, the discharge is pleasurable and produces laughter. In 1927 he produced a paper called simply "On Humor" in which he observed that laughing at one's self is not depressing but liberating.

A fourth type of laughter was suggested by John Morreall, which he called a "pleasant psychological shift." An unpleasant shift leads to tears. His pleasant shift includes the shifts involved in the first three more incomplete models just discussed. Morreall argued that the shift, he was talking about, is not the direct source of laughter, nor is the pleasant feeling. Laughter is produced by the "physical activity" of the shift, which might be called "amusement" or "mirth."

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[33] Herbert Spencer, "Physiology of Laughter" in *Macmillan's Magazine*, March 1860.

My view of this shift is that it is the experience of re-framing, such as the shift from work to play. The shift in perspective gives pleasure, because it enables one to be more creative in treating the situation. This is not exactly what Morreall argues, but I would like to make this sense of "the shift" the fourth cause of laughter. As soon as children notice this reframing and feel safe in its boundaries, they are delighted and begin to play. This begins at an early age, as anyone knows who has bent over a crib to play peek-a-boo with in infant.

The laughter of delight does not deny seriousness. It denies what is the intolerant and closed. Laughter liberates religion from fanaticism and pedantry by bringing multiple perspectives into play. It unwinds the bindings of fear and intimidation. The connection between laughter and freedom leads to the recreation religion fosters. Godly Play's challenge to unrelenting seriousness in religion is why Godly Play is a political act. It pushes back against the principalities and powers that try to distort the Image of God within.

Power and Christian Laughter

Michael Bahktin (1895-1975) included a history of laughter in his book *Rabelais and His World*. His history showed how culture, power and Christian laughter are connected, but the story of his book itself brings this out even better than his history.

The book was finished by 1940, but it could not be published in Russia until 1965. This shows how dangerous laughter is perceived to be by totalitarian regimes, whose leaders are unable to laugh. The list is long and involves many continents: --- Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, etc. They seek absolute power and fanatical control rather then enjoying the wisdom of laughter and creative freedom.

Bakhtin and his work was a threat to Russian leadership, because he understood the primal force of laughter and wanted to help "carnivalize" Russia with his essay. He did this out of hope for the future, because freedom and creativity had been nearly extinguished in his homeland and people cannot remain human in such circumstances. Freedom of expression and creativity had been squeezed out of the Russian to make one leader, one party, and one aesthetic.

Bakhtin resisted this mental confinement and sought to create a space for freedom in the Stalinization of Russian folklore. He wanted to promote the exuberance and "corrosive laughter" of ordinary people to push primal laughter back into the official worldview so that public life could be more open and livable. His study of Rabelais (1494-1553) and his two giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, demonstrated how laughter can be suppressed and distorted, but at the same time his study suggested the need of human beings for laughter to flourish.[34]

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[34] The view of primal laughter in Rabelais' writing begins to change during the first third of the seventeenth century. The festive laughter of the people had disappeared in the culture of Europe, so Gargantua and Pantagruel were inexplicable. They needed academic interpretation, but that kind of interpretation resulted in a historical-allegorical view that prevailed for three centuries. The festive, earthy laughter that originally shaped Rabelais' work had been forgotten, so his stories were construed as personal invective.

Laughter's definition continued to narrow in the eighteenth century. This meant that universal laughter, which had previously included both the highborn and those of low birth also disappeared. Bakhtin thought that Rabelais was least understood during the Enlightenment. For example, Voltaire thought Rabelais was "extravagant and unintelligible." His work was considered "naked and straight satire." During the eighteenth century the spirit of Rabelais' work was reduced to "bare mockery" and was contrasted unfavorably with the "laughter of Voltaire," and considered to have neither a regenerating nor renewing element left in it.

Bakhtin thought that the nineteenth century emphasized the realism of "eavesdropping and peeping," so literary laughter was limited to irony and sarcasm. The grotesque exaggeration of Rabelais that had delighted so many during the sixteenth century now seemed merely destructive. The enormous amounts of food, drink, and clothes needed to sustain the two giants were seen as heavy expenses imposed upon the people. The celebration of abundance was no longer noticed.

Critics attempted to force Rabelais into either the rationalist box of atheism or into the "mindless" box of religious faith. They were blind to the depth and breadth of his theology, which extravagantly challenged

The disappearance of laughter's seriously comic and universal vision of life and death carried with it the fragmentation of society into great and small, into the exalted and lowly, the fantastic and real, the physical and spiritual, rising and falling, flowering and growing old, and life and death. The great circus tent of soaring theological laughter had collapsed with a whoosh. Bakhtin's history showed how the primal awareness of joy transcends the transient, because in the long run there is plenitude over finitude. Any narrow, tight, constriction of laughter's reality stifles the expression of a healthy, comprehensive view of life. The history of Bakhtin's book and his history of the interpretation of Rabelais is a cautionary tale for Godly Play and the church.

Godly Play listens for and encourages a buoyant and exuberant laughter, because this is the expression of the image of the Creator, *creating* in each child as its foundation. This is a sign of the children's participation in the creative process, the making of ultimate meaning, with each other and with the Creator. This laughter shows that the children are playing with God in a creative community with the parables, sacred stories, liturgical action, and contemplative silence to make deep meaning, which gives them profound pleasure. The laughter that expresses such pleasure is always in danger, as Bakhtin has warned us by his life and his history of the changing views of the laughter in Rabelais.

The Laughter of Delight

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all intolerant seriousness and avoided all dogmatism, something the nineteenth century church desired to promote.

Rabelais did not use humor to hide his atheist tendencies, as some modern scholars have argued. He wanted to express the pervasive comedy in all of life and death, represented by the crowning and uncrowning of clowns in the Roman Saturnalia and European church carnivals. He wanted to give eloquence by exaggeration to the thousand-year-old wisdom, flowing from ordinary people's optimism that flourished despite their awareness that their hopes could be smashed at any moment and in any place. The same is true of the laughter in Godly Play.

The quality of laughter is important for Godly Play primarily because it is related to the experience of God's presence. I observed in *Godly Play* (1991) that when we experience God's presence our breathing is disrupted. The surprise causes us to draw in our breath. This is the moment of inspiration. As the experience continues we let out our breath slowly as a sigh, which sounds like "Ahhh." There is then an "Aha" when we notice that we are experiencing God's presence, but at that moment the experience shifts into the past tense. We are no longer fully engaged and when we realize that we can't think about being in God's presence while we are in it, the paradox makes us laugh. As we work through the paradox our laughter falls silent, circle closes, and we return to the everyday world.

When we reflect on this experience we realize that the structure of our creative process --- opening, scanning, insight, development and soft closure --- parallels the mostly nonverbal experience of God's presence. We can see how we created mostly non-verbal meaning about the experience of the Creator's dynamic presence, expressed in the formation of laughter.

This experience is as if a beautiful stone were dropped into the lake of our consciousness to make concentric rings lapping outward as we shift into levels of language to recycle this experience. The sigh after the surprise becomes the scanning of the creative process and is best expressed by the action of liturgy. Sighing God's presence into meaning is not so much about what is said as what is done in worship. The "Aha" shades into the search for one's self in the sacred story of such experiences, as we follow God's elusive presence in the narrative of scripture. The laughter of paradox becomes the parables and the contemplative silence now responds to the original silence.

The third concentric ring of awareness shifts the language from fully participating in liturgical action to a fascination with the words, symbols, and the rubrics of worship. The sacred story leaves narrative behind and takes a step closer to abstraction by turning the stories into law codes and proverbs. The parables are transformed into example stories and parabolic aphorisms. Each step away from the core experience of the Creator's presence becomes less involving of the whole person and, therefore, less able to make existential meaning, which involves the whole person.

Finally, at the highest level of abstraction our involvement in Christian language becomes theology, which is helpful to organize our thoughts *about* God. This level of abstraction, however, is far from *being in* the original experience. This realization, despite one's respect for *thinking about* God, causes many to turn around and begin to move back through the concentric rings to seek once again the original laughter of delight that unifies and expresses the whole involvement with the Creator. Then there is the silence, not the silence of the laughter but the original silence of union. Our awareness of God's presence as the source of Christian language shows how we can use it to find our way home.